Bloom in Love

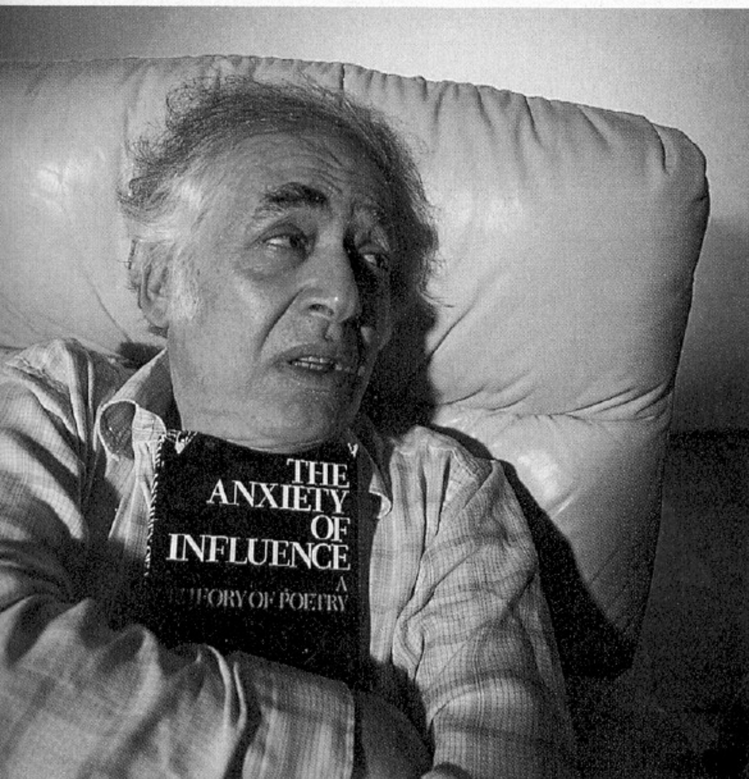
The pursuit of coeds is yet another intellectual challenge for Harold Bloom, America's most brilliant and bizarre literary critic

BY MARTIN KIHN

THE SIREN who cracks open Harold Bloom's red door in New Haven does not look like his wife of three decades. Jeanne Bloom is silver-haired, slightly overweight, a chain-smoking child psychologist with a cabbie's hard voice. This woman is strawberry-blonde, low-fat, neatly dressed in a brown skirt and blouse and an ice-water smile. She tells me she "just dropped by," but I doubt it. For all his epic arrogance, Bloom is fundamentally afraid of people.

The woman—she says her name is Jenny—is his rubber raft. She sits five feet from him throughout our conversation. Utterly silent. Smiling whenever he raises his voice.

"Obviously I am not a feminist! . . . Criticism in this country is nothing but a mindless School of Resentment. . . . Literary matters are not democratic! . . . Universities seem determined to commit suicide!"



"At Yale he's like a god," says a former student. "It's like having Zeus come down and say, 'I pick you. I will make you a demigoddess!'"

None of this can be easy for Bloom. Two weeks before, he came as close to death as anyone who can still discuss it could. A stomach ulcer ruptured, spilling half his blood. Then he suffered a mild heart attack, which wasn't even noticed until the confusion passed. "It has been a very profound experience," he tells one of the many friends—including America's new poet laureate, Mark Strand—who call to voice their grief. "We all need each other," he says to another, eyeing Jenny sadly.

Bloom has a massive organ. It sits in the cradle of his skull, incubating every word that *counts*. Every word of *Paradise Lost* ("None ever wished it longer," said Samuel Johnson). Every word of *The Faerie Queene*. Forty years ago, when he was drunk and in college at Cornell, he would recite Hart Crane's *The Bridge* backward, like some satanic tape recorder: "Return lark's the of precincts agile the . . . "

His fingers are absurd, too. He claims to read 1,000 pages an hour, which is seventeen pages a minute, or one every three and a half seconds. Try it. Blister-fingered, he remembers every line of poetry he's ever read. Or so he says: "It's no parlor trick."

The sheer horsepower of Bloom's brain is matched by its speed: He has written or edited nearly 500 books since 1959, ranging from the 1973 classic on poetic inspiration that made him famous, *The Anxiety of Influence*, to an inadvertently funny 1979 fantasy novel, *The Flight to Lucifer*, which Bloom now disowns, to his latest work, *The Book of J*, published last month, in which Bloom argues that the Bible's most important author was a woman. As Yale University's one-man department of humanities (in 1988 he also became the Berg Professor of English at New York University), he is by far that famous school's most famous writer and teacher, perhaps America's most influential living literary critic.

He claims to have known every major American writer since Wallace Stevens—current intimates include Philip Roth, good friend Harold Brodkey and (he hints) Thomas Pynchon—and has feuded openly with the likes of John Updike and Reagan's education secretary, William Bennett.

Former students, from noted feminist critics Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert to novelist David Leavitt, form a two-generation phalanx of literary foot soldiers. In the academic cloister, Bloom's influence has bolstered many reputations (Stevens, John Ashbery) while savaging others (Sylvia Plath, T.S. Eliot).

His own reputation took a hit in 1988, when his brainchild, the projected 1,000- *(continued on page 154)*

(continued from page 151) volume Chelsea House literary-criticism project, an unprecedented anthology of essays covering the entire Western canon, all but went bust. "It's typical Harold in that it's Harold at his most exasperating," says *The New Republic*'s literary editor, Leon Wieseltier, of the Chelsea House debacle. "Sometimes he acts like a demiurgic dissertation supervisor, thinking that all the writers in the history of the world should come before him to get their grades."

A man of dense, black moods, Bloom is an inveterate insomniac. At times, depression drops so hard he wanders crazily around the campus and people have had to go out in the snow to retrieve him. The 60-year-old man sitting this spring day in the big corner armchair, his gout-ridden right leg on an ottoman, looks more like a mole than a maverick. The American Heart Association's *Low-Fat, Low-Cholesterol Cookbook* lies on his coffee table, and he talks a lot now about living longer and "losing all of this excess weight," although that weight is as much a trademark as are his thick lips and sparse, cotton-white Mozartean hair.

Bloom blames a "mad Talmudic ancestor" for the crushing burden of his memory. Novelist Cynthia Ozick (who once said she was "in love" with Bloom) has written about his "supernal—even infernal—erudition." And when he won an award from the Phi Beta Kappa society last year, one of its committee members compared reading Bloom's winning book to "standing in the presence of the Infinite."

Mad! Infernal! Infinite! Bloom commands extremes—in adjectives, in devotion from his students, in both lavish admiration and savage criticism from his peers, whom he doesn't consider peers anyway. Students describe him as being variously charismatic, pained and slovenly in the classroom; Bloom has a personal style—lispy, allusive, intimidating—that is almost heroic in its intensity.

"I think any person with authentic aesthetic interests," he begins, "who despises politics and believes that it is possible to talk about poems as being good and bad poems strictly on aesthetic grounds and is willing to try to understand why some poems are better than other poems—or who'd even begin to talk about poems or imaginative works as having 'a meaning' which is not determined by questions of gender, social class and race—is now automatically a pariah in the profession as a man of letters, so-called, since it nearly has been taken over by this noisy mob of charlatans."

There are 101 words in that sentence. After a lifetime of lecturing, Bloom can't do anything but, whether he's referring obsessively to the School of Resentment—that is, the feminist, Marxist and other -ist critics who have come to dominate the post-1960s academe, or the "mindless nonvisions of television" or the "mindless cabal" that runs our universities or just "*obscene* mindlessness" in general. "And I'd be delighted to be quoted on that."

"My dear," Bloom sighs in his weary singsong, "we live more than ever in the age of schlock. Indeed, *The New York Times* cannot be distinguished from that schlock. Schlock has so gained upon it that it should be called *The New York Schlock.* What passes for a book review is nothing but schlock. It's not even kitsch, it's just schlock."

Bloom described Satan as having "all my own best qualities."

Angry, paranoid ("I seem to be the favorite whipping boy of every feminist critic"), he seems at times at the end of his tether. "I have almost despaired," he moans, "of getting my ideas across."

Those ideas, first outlined in *The Anxiety of Influence,* are based on Bloom's belief that poetic creation is a struggle, a clash of wills in which each poet wrestles with the voices of his precursors while trying to clear out a space for himself. He does this by "willfully misreading" those precursors—that is, applying his own warp and woof to the words and ideas that came before him. "What Bloom does, in effect," says critic Terry Eagleton, "is to rewrite literary history in terms of the Oedipus complex."

The notoriety of Bloom's small book shifted the ground under American literary criticism. It also began the Romantic scholar's transformation into a genuine campus oracle. Now, almost two decades later, Bloom's stature as tin-pot dictator of his own little Burkina Faso at Yale means he doesn't so much educate as he enters students' lives, folding them into his own.

Particularly the lives of attractive young women. Grasping, ambitious young women—or just women who may be, for the first time, very, very far from home.

Any honest Yale undergraduate will tell you he or she has heard stories about Bloom's unusually close friendships with certain handpicked protégés. Friendships that can consist of years of a daily, hands-on involvement in Bloom's personal life and that resemble nothing so much as a marriage without the cohabitation.

"He's a notorious flirt," says a 27-year-old former student, now living in New York City, who claims that Bloom once made "a pass" at her. The young woman, who didn't succumb to his seductions, says she feels "very angry about the whole thing." She also says that although she never made a concerted effort "to find out about Harold's love life," she has firsthand knowledge of five intimate relationships that blossomed over a three-year period between Bloom and various female students or employees at the New Haven headquarters of the Chelsea House project.

"In the scheme of things he's not real powerful," says another former student who began what became a very close relationship with Bloom while she was still an undergraduate, "but at Yale he's like a god. It's like having Zeus come down and say, '*I pick you, you are the most brilliant, I will make you a demigoddess!*' " Christina Baker, an ex-Yalie who has attended Bloom's lectures but never had a social relationship with him, attests: "He's this kind of enigmatic figure because he's so famous. That's part of it—that charm and attraction you feel to a famous figure."

It's hard to take seriously Bloom's reputation as a Lothario when faced with his shuffling, bowed physique. (Indeed, when asked about such charges, Bloom replies, "That's ridiculous. . . . Absolutely not true.") But remember, this is a man who once described Milton's Satan as having "all my own best qualities," a man so intellectually desirable that one undergraduate even threatened suicide if the pundit didn't admit her into one of his immensely popular, already filled seminars. He did. Another woman—a tall, striking vixen who was once the object of Andy Warhol's approval—simply visited Bloom in his office and asked to be let into a different, also completely full, seminar. Bloom examined her credentials and complied.

Another element of Bloom's appeal is the weighty influence he wields in the academic world, where the advocacy of a "name" professor can mean admission into competitive graduate schools or the securing of grants and even jobs. By all accounts, he is generous to his charges, an

easy grader and a ready writer of first-rate recommendations for both men and women. It can hardly be his fault if certain extra-ambitious students try to merit an even more glowing recommendation by revealing more of themselves to him outside of class.

"It's probably pretty crassly that they're hoping he will recommend them for jobs," says former student Amy Bomse, who notes that most of the young women Bloom becomes especially close to are graduate students. Another former student who socialized with Bloom says, "They're all big girls, and they all know what the stakes are. . . . I don't believe in Svengali. People have their own conscious and unconscious reasons for doing things."

Whatever the cause-and-effect connection, Bloom's favorites do seem to fare quite well in the eyes of academic juries. There is the case of one woman who got a prestigious overseas scholarship despite her admission that she had "one of every grade." She later boasted privately to friends that she had joined Bloom in one of his beloved banana bubble baths. Another woman, who was "extremely admired by Harold," according to a friend of hers, received a grant to study English at Yale. Still another woman whom Bloom liked was awarded a fellowship to study in South America.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that Bloom's relationships with such women are all crudely physical. Despite his designs, his appearance is a significant deterrent, and former students in a position to know say that he is not quite the Casanova of legend. Instead, Bloom seems to delight in dragging those students who are willing into an elaborate Freudian dependency ritual—one in which he is both motherly and helpless.

For instance, Bloom doesn't drive. He used to, but he just doesn't want to anymore. "You have to drive him everywhere," says a formerly devoted student. "You have to go to the bank with him and Xerox stuff for him. It's a kind of apprenticeship, a rite of passage." If you're on your way to his house, he'll often ask you to bring him a roast-beef submarine. Sometimes, Bloom will ask you to feed the sandwich to him.

Certainly, he reveals sides of himself to his students that other, more conventional, professors might keep hidden. Once, he led a pair of unwary male students, including the late Yale President Bart Giamatti's son Paul, from his office to a nearby men's room, where he proceeded to sit down and evacuate himself, grunting and groaning, while keeping up a steady stream of chatter. And, when students visit his house in the morning, they may climb up to his attic office to find him asleep on the floor, curled up on the carpet with his books.

After a while, certain very special—or simply indulgent—disciples are treated to what Bloom makes sure they appreciate as sub-rosa confessions, the kind he wouldn't make to just anybody. One favorite is that he is really novelist Harold Robbins. ("Sometimes, critics who can't compromise their stature," he told one student in all seriousness, "are forced to write under a pseudonym.") Another is that the Israeli government used him as a document courier in the 1950s because of his memory. He also claims that the small scar on his forehead is actually a bullet wound suffered in the 1948 war to found Israel—and that a number of recent novels about Vietnam, written by authors who are his friends, are actually based on *his* forty-year-old war stories. He tells these students he continues to meet with unspecified "arms dealers," intimating that he is a linchpin for Zionism's efforts in the United States.

"I think with Harold," says a longtime friend who has heard all of Bloom's stories, "it's just like a child or a novelist. There's a seed of truth in all of it. But he tends to make big trees out of them that aren't really there."

Although the courtship phase can last years, by all accounts the elaborate drama of secret-telling and flattery usually ends abruptly, overnight. "Whoever was number one could get all this attention," says the friend, "but then there was always the other ones. And eventually they found out and would quit him."

One student later boasted that she had joined Bloom in one of his beloved banana bubble baths.

The Great Depression and Harold Bloom began life together. Bloom was born in an East Bronx hospital nine months after Black Thursday, the youngest "by many years" of the five children of William Bloom and Paula Lev, Orthodox Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Yiddish was the only language spoken at home, meaning, as Bloom says, "I learned English through the eye rather than the ear"—which accounts for the fact that he talks as Jane Austen writes and pronounces words oddly (stuffing six syllables into "aeronautical," for instance).

The great pontificator gets tongue-tied and uncomfortable when asked about his family. Even friends who have known him for years are in the dark. One of them got the impression that Bloom and his father, who was a dressmaker, did not have a happy relationship. Another friend remembers Bloom's mentioning a brother who fought for years in the Israeli army.

But, as Bloom points out, his parents are dead, and his once-large extended family is now extinct. Even the kind sister he mentions in *Agon* is dead—Esther, the one who bought him the first book he ever owned, a volume of Hart Crane's poems, for his twelfth birthday. By this time his family had moved up to the Grand Concourse at 170th Street and Bloom had started attending the academically rigorous Bronx High School of Science.

Which he *loathed*. "The atmosphere at Bronx Science was stifling," he laments. "There were no young ladies there in those days, just men, which was, I think, brutalizing. Everybody was intellectually competitive, but in the wrong kind of way—really quite nasty. I'd only gone there because it seemed to be, as it were, more elitist." And, of course, he had no scientific interests. Eventually, he graduated near the bottom of his class.

"I had my education at the library," he says, positively rhapsodic. Beginning with Crane and Blake, he read his way through various branches of the New York public-library system, sitting in the reading rooms, devouring book after book.

Were his parents, who never went to college, alarmed by their precocious genius? "I don't think they particularly noticed," Bloom all but whispers. "They realized that I was very quiet and studious. That I didn't want to go out and play and that I just wanted to keep reading." It was left to an uncle, Sam Kaplan, who ran a candy store in Brooklyn, to tell him there were places out there for people like him.

Despite his bad grades, a first-place finish in a state regents exam won Bloom a full scholarship to Cornell University, which he initially thought was in Iowa. It was 1946, and at 16 Bloom had never been

outside New York City. He remembers, on his first evening in Ithaca, strolling with a friend down a road toward the agricultural campus. "And I suddenly clutched him and said, 'Robert, what is that ghastly, shaggy beast coming toward us?' And he looked at me incredulously and said, 'Harold, you've never seen a cow before?' "

Thomas Gould, a Yale classics professor and a friend of Bloom's at Cornell, recalls that Bloom, who was "a mixture of Groucho Marx and Zero Mostel" even then, often lectured to large groups of rapt ephebes and spent time swapping ideas with professors two and three times his age. "He had a circle of admirers that included other undergraduates, plus graduate students, plus faculty," says Gould. And when he graduated, in 1951, it was virtually at the top of his class.

At Yale, whose faculty he joined after receiving his Ph.D. there, in 1955, Bloom launched his career of rebellion. First, he championed the then-unfashionable Romantic poets Shelley, Wordsworth and Keats. Then he assailed the prevailing orthodoxy of New Criticism and its dogma that literary works should be read hermetically, without reference to external influences, such as other works or the author's biography. *The Anxiety of Influence,* Bloom's seventh book, was essentially a frontal attack on the beliefs of the Yale English department.

"I had always, for some reason that I no longer altogether understand, gotten quite violently nasty reviews," says Bloom. "But I was not prepared for the storm of abuse that broke out, or even certain old friends here at Yale telling me that they thought it was an outrageous and bad thing." The furor spurred Bloom to leave the English department, and in 1974 he became DeVane Professor of the Humanities.

"[Bloom's book] took off because it had a neat, catchy phrase that people didn't fully understand," says poet John Hollander, Bloom's colleague at Yale and a close friend for more than thirty years. "A lot of people were upset by the book, but I didn't think for really good reason. Not-very-good poets were upset because they kept saying, 'Well, this doesn't apply to me.' "

He has continued to foster, indeed thrive on, controversy ever since, with his contributions to publications such as *The New York Review of Books* almost always touching off debate. In retrospect, most of Bloom's critics seem to be responding more to his *tone* than to his content. His books are written in a bizarre, discursive style ("Influence is *Influenza*—an astral disease") that is easy to dislike.

Bloom has also habitually evoked venom by launching personal crusades against his detractors. In 1977, critic Hilton Kramer, who would later found *The New Criterion,* wrote in *The New York Times* that Bloom's books were "punishing to students of literature" and "remorselessly resistant to both readability and common sense." Bloom responded with a thirteen-year vendetta, calling Kramer "unforgivable and obscene" at the slightest provocation.

Today, Kramer says, "I think that Harold Bloom regards any attempt to question the wisdom of his words as unforgivable, which is a very odd position for a critic to be in. I think he's had a very baleful influence on American criticism, but I don't find him interesting enough to argue with. I think he writes more than he thinks."

The Chelsea House project might have been the culmination of Bloom's career and his legacy to the larger world. Designed for high-school and college libraries, it consists of books of previously published essays organized around individual works, authors and literary characters.

In the essays Bloom chose to include, and, more important, in his idiosyncratic introductions to each volume, he had the unparalleled opportunity, in effect, to create his own canon. "The most heroic . . . undertaking in the history of Western literary endeavors," crowed *The Philadelphia Inquirer* when the project was announced in 1984. "A publishing venture almost without precedent," enthused *Newsweek.*

As it turned out, the project was to become Bloom's biggest professional disappointment—the *Howard the Duck* of academic publishing. What started out as a cottage industry in New York with one or two employees devoted to a single critical anthology exploded, as Bloom demanded more and more editorial control, into a New Haven "factory" with its own staff of dozens of full-time and part-time employees working on three different series of books. In 1984, when the hiring for Bloom's project began, Chelsea House published a total of twenty-five titles. The publisher's 1990–91 catalogue lists, in Bloom's series alone, 450 titles in print. "We produced too many books too quickly, which was my fault," says Bloom. "It was a question of my enthusiasm and my intensity. . . . I was a victim of my own nature.

As I so frequently am."

Chelsea House's New Haven office was in some ways Bloom's ultimate salon. He spent hours sitting in a big black leather armchair, his workers scampering about him. He was "the Great Oz," and they were his "little bears." Ultimately, all this activity undermined the product, which often ended up being hastily thrown together. Sales plummeted as libraries balked at investing $25 to $65 each for hundreds of dubiously useful books, and in April 1988 the New Haven office was closed by Chelsea House's parent, the Main Line Book Company (although Bloom's series sputters along, with the New York office putting out about a dozen books each year).

What neither the press nor the typically more cynical academic Establishment appreciated was that Bloom's inspiration for taking on the task was not solely literary. "What informed it besides bravura on my part," he admits, "were certain family health and economic problems."

Such problems have dogged him ever since his eldest son, Daniel, was diagnosed more than fifteen years ago as suffering from a chronic disorder. Now 27, he has spent most of his adult life in and out of hospitals. Meanwhile, Bloom's other son, David, is a perennial Cornell undergraduate in his mid-twenties who's still largely dependent upon his father.

All of which is a crushing financial burden for an academic, an onus made even worse by the fact that Yale's family health insurance can't possibly cover the full cost of Daniel's care, which can run up to $20,000 a month. So even though Bloom may be the best-paid in his field—his Yale salary is said to be in the neighborhood of $100,000, and in 1985 he received a $260,000 MacArthur "genius" award—it is still not enough. And it may never be.

For a sick man, Bloom has been overgenerous with his time. Toward the end of our interview, when he talked about there being no such thing as satire with the world the way it is now, that everything is sort of *beyond* satire, his voice thinned into a hiss. But as I was packing up my notebook, he decided we weren't through after all.

Eyeing me suspiciously, he hauled himself upright and took my hand in his. "My dear, you actually *live* in New York?"

"Yes."

"Don't you find it *hard*?" I don't know why, but I suddenly felt afraid of even the safest streets in New York City.

"And don't you find it *hard*, my dear, financially?" I think he also asked me what I wanted to do with my life.

Bloom raises doubts and fills them with fear. He does this as naturally as breathing. What is it like to be a young woman, homesick and endemically unsure, arriving in this genius's presence? Because the flip side of all that anxiety is the solace that Bloom might be there to help you handle it. Bloom really seems to *care*.

As one of these young women told me: "You're already so insecure to begin with, and to get all this attention is very, very flattering . . . and confusing."

What this particular woman failed to mention was that there was a summer, a few years ago, when many of her friends didn't know where she was. That was the summer she spent in a quiet place, recovering from Harold Bloom. •

Martin Kihn is an assistant editor at Spy.

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